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[This is a pre-publication version of the following article]

Cutting the Buddha's body to fit the neoliberal suit: Mindfulness - From Practice, to Purchase, to Praxis – Elliot Cohen (Leeds Beckett University).

This paper will consider how the secularising and psychologising of Buddhism has encouraged and enabled an almost seamless assimilation of mindfulness into a consumerist, neoliberal ideology and framework – leading to the emergence of a distinctly neoliberal mindfulness (Purser et al. 2016). In particular, I wish to consider the language of mindfulness, and how in the wrong mouths, this can disempower individuals as opposed to liberating and awakening them - as originally prescribed in the original Buddhist *Sutras* (scriptures). In the conclusion, I wish to consider how Buddhism in America is becoming more politically and socially engaged, in order to appropriately address and respond to the warning of the eminent Buddhist monk, translator and activist Bhikkhu Bodhi:

‘... absent a sharp social critique, Buddhist practices could easily be used to justify and stabilise the status quo, becoming a reinforcement of consumer capitalism.’ (Bodhi quoted in Eaton 2013)

This paper begins, as all critical endeavours begin, with an argument. The argument in question took place online, between an ordained Buddhist minister¹ and myself, and concerned an “exciting new opportunity” they had been presented with, to teach mindfulness to nurses within the UK’s National Health Service (NHS).

In support of this endeavour, I had been sent a recent article from the *Nursing Times* (Brass 2016) which concluded with the now familiar and popular sentiment:

Mindfulness and self-compassion are useful in helping any individual cope with the pressures of everyday life but may be even more useful in healthcare, where pressures are great and the ability to deliver compassionate care is fundamental. Courses to help health practitioners understand and engage in these practices have proven beneficial and should be considered for nurses across the health service. (Brass 2016, p.21)

The article’s author is identified as the public relations manager for Breathworks CIC; a Community Interest Company, owned by *Triratana*² (formerly the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order). *Triratana* is a distinctly Western Buddhist organisation that has historically

¹ In the interests of ethics and anonymity I will not name the minister or his particular Buddhist denomination.

² *Triratana* – is a traditional Pali term meaning ‘Three Jewels’; a popular abbreviation for the central objects of devotion in Buddhism - being the Buddha (teacher), Dharma (teaching) and Sangha (monastics and lay followers)

kept itself quite separate from more traditional and indigenous schools of Buddhism, and is dedicated to translating the Buddhist teachings for a Western audience. Breathworks CIC offers secular mindfulness training (and teacher training) programmes for both individuals and organisations³.

This increasing enthusiasm for Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) had been previously affirmed and further articulated in an All-Party Parliamentary Report from October 2015 titled ‘Mindful Nation UK’; which has outlined and advised the application of mindfulness to such diverse areas as Health, Education, the Work Place and the Criminal Justice System – I will consider this document, its language and context more fully, later in this paper.

The Buddhist minister in question, expressed excitement and optimism that this increasing interest in mindfulness reflected a ‘sea change’ in individual, societal and governmental attitudes towards the role meditation may soon play in promoting wellbeing; but I did not share his optimism.

In 2010 I had written the article ‘The Psychologisation of Buddhism: From the Bodhi tree, to the analyst’s couch, then into the MRI scanner’ which had outlined some of the ways in which Buddhism had been increasingly secularised and medicalised – but I now wonder if this article went far enough, and whether I sufficiently identified and addressed the socio-economic and political context within which these transformations were occurring (and to what end?); this is what I intend to explore in this article. It took the Buddhist minister’s new ‘opportunity’ to serve as the catalyst for this more politically-aware critique to take shape, and I had consequently replied in a short private message:

Having previously worked for an NHS trust, I have genuine concerns about these new trends of corporate-based mindfulness training. I do not doubt that nurses are faced with increasing pressures and are suffering terribly from stress. But we must recognise that this is largely due to their working conditions. Nurses are generally overworked, overmanaged, underpaid, understaffed and underappreciated!

In short, this appeared to perfectly illustrate the neoliberal strategy of privatising stress and anguish (Fisher 2011), deflecting responsibility away from NHS managers and politicians, and instead requiring the workers – in this instance the nurses - to simply ‘better manage’ and ‘adapt’ to their stressful work environment.

Mindfulness – Defined and Re-Defined

The term *Sati* - ‘mindfulness’ is just one term⁴ found within the Buddhist lexicon for practices which are typically translated as ‘meditation’. Indeed, the decision to term the practice

³ <http://www.breathworks-mindfulness.org.uk/> accessed 31.03.17

⁴ Others include *Samadhi* – concentration/absorption, *Bhavana* – cultivation, *Samatha* – calm abiding and *Vipassana* – insight meditation.

‘mindfulness’, as opposed to ‘meditation’ appears to be part of a general movement to de-spiritualise what was traditionally a contemplative practice.

Perhaps the most popular, familiar, and secular definition of mindfulness comes from its leading proponent Jon Kabat-Zinn, who has defined it as:

The awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment. (Kabat-Zinn 2003, p.145)

This awareness is further enhanced through seven attitudinal foundations; ‘non-judging, patience, beginner’s mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance and letting go’ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, pp.33-40).

Within its original Buddhist context, mindfulness is encountered as part of the Noble Eightfold Path⁵, and is contained within a well-defined and purposefully structured training system; which includes a particular emphasis on ethical training (*sila*).

The purpose of this training was, and remains the realisation of *Nirvana* - Awakening⁶, and the purpose of meditation was to experientially investigate, recognise and realise the Buddhist teachings. The problems emerge when one intentionally begins to remove these ‘attitudinal foundations’ from their Buddhist context. As one English academic and Tibetan Buddhist Master, Lama Jampa Thaye, has noted in his article ‘Living by Meditation Alone’:

Secular mindfulness has found a place in society, but occupying a somewhat different cultural and spiritual space, a new Buddhism has emerged alongside it. Its adherents claim that the fruits of the Buddhist tradition can be acquired through sitting meditation alone. Contemporary practitioners, in other words, need not bother with study, ethical precepts, ritual practice (other than meditation), or merit making. (Thaye 2015)

Indeed this ‘cultural and spiritual space’ had already been ably exposed and outlined by Carrette (2007) and Carrette and King (2005) as constituting a neoliberal hegemony; in which spirituality itself has been gradually and successfully commodified; whilst Asian Wisdom traditions (especially Buddhism) have been increasingly privatised (Carrette and King 2005, pp.87-122).

Once this new neoliberal context is recognised, alongside its market and management-centeredness, emphasis on competition, extreme individualism (particularly in regards to individual responsibility) and the continued promotion and expansion of a consumerist culture and value system (Monbiot 2017), then these attitudinal foundations and the language of ‘non-judging, non-striving’ and ‘acceptance’ become problematic; as one appears to be potentially

⁵ Right view, Right Intentions, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration (Bodhi 1999)

⁶ This term is understood and translated in various ways, but is most simply expressed as the extinguishing of the three poisons of craving, hatred and ignorance.

removing or weakening people's capacity to resist or object⁷ – which would appear to be the objective of 'neoliberal mindfulness'.

The Buddha in a Business Suit⁸

In the business world one can observe the popularity of mindfulness as a way to ensure one remains as competitive and 'awake' to potential opportunities as possible. The *Harvard Business Review* has now published numerous online articles over the last several years which illustrate and celebrate the new role mindfulness is playing in the corporate world.

One typical example included the headline - 'Mindfulness can literally change your brain' (Congleton et al. 2015) and investigated the role of increased activity in the 'anterior cingulate cortex', which is enhanced through mindfulness, plays in 'self-regulation' and also 'optimal decision making'. They also consider the role of hippocampus and limbic system, which they report can be damaged and depleted by stress; whilst noting that in meditators there appears to be 'increased amounts of gray matter'. They conclude 'Mindfulness should no longer be considered a "nice-to-have" for executives. It's a "must-have"' (Ibid.)

This designating mindfulness as a "must-have", reconstrues the practice into a purchase; instead of a meditative discipline to cultivate, mindfulness becomes simply yet another commodity or something to acquire. But the article also demonstrates how the language and practice of mindfulness may be medicalised and essentially reduced to commentary on brain structure and chemistry.

The neuroscientific language, complete with brain imaging scans from MRIs, provides the scientific seal of authenticity – although it is highly unlikely that a largely non-specialist audience of business executives would be in a position to critically evaluate the information provided. In summary, the article appears to possess many of the hallmarks scientism and the 'cult of neuroscience' (Lears 2015, p.214), but its language also has the effect of de-contextualising and redirecting our discussions concerning stress, particularly in terms of socio-economic or working conditions, to the measuring of one's cortisol levels. In this same manner, one might argue that if one is not happy it is primarily due to one's inability to metabolise serotonin efficiently.

The 'Blanding' of Mindfulness

One notable article that generated a lot of debate was Ron Purser and David Loy's (2013) 'Beyond McMindfulness', published in the Huffington Post. Purser and Loy are both authorised teachers in the Zen tradition, and objected to what they saw as the unacknowledged 'shadow' of the 'mindfulness revolution'. The label/accusation 'McMindfulness' is particularly effective as it effortlessly evokes associations of fast food, a lazy, quick-fix culture, and perhaps also suggests

⁷ It is useful at this point to consider the minority opinion of one Buddhist Professor of Nagpur University, who was part of *Ambedkarite* Buddhist movement, who warned that the values of 'equanimity, peace and tolerance' (Queen 2003 pp.2-3) cultivated in meditation may actually serve to weaken the community's activism and resistance against the Indian caste system.

⁸ 'Buddha in a business suit: The art of heartfelt management' is the full title of a book by meditation teacher and musician Johannes Linstead (2010).

a lack of genuine spiritual nourishment. In addition to considering the commodification of mindfulness they also refer directly to Carrette and King (2005) when considering the socio-political implications:

The result is an atomised and highly privatized version of mindfulness practice, which is easily coopted and confined to what Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, in their book *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, describe as an “accommodationist” orientation. Mindfulness training has wide appeal because it has become a trendy method for subduing employee unrest, promoting a tacit acceptance of the status quo, and as an instrumental tool for keeping attention focused on institutional goals. (Purser and Loy 2013)

These arguments are reminiscent of some of my earlier critiques (Cohen 2010) of Buddhist modernism and its transformation of Buddhism into secular forms of psychotherapy committed to ‘adjustment’ as opposed to awakening. It is also significant to note that in Carrette and King’s original discussion of accommodationism, they were directly referring the work of noted Integral theorist (former pioneer of Transpersonal Psychology) Ken Wilber, who had also been quite adamant about recognising and preserving the spiritual roots of meditation:

Meditation, it is said, is a way to evoke the relaxation response... a technique for calming the central nervous system; a way to relieve stress, bolster self-esteem, reduce anxiety, and alleviate depression... But I would like to emphasise that meditation itself has always been a *spiritual* practice. (Wilber 1993, p.76)

Similar sentiments have been echoed in more recent academic articles (Reveley 2016, Hyland 2016, Hyland 2015).

Hyland’s (2015) paper ‘McMindfulness in the workplace: vocational learning and the commodification of the present moment’, critiques the ‘mutation’ of mindfulness from its original focus on liberation to more profit-focussed motivations, and further objects to the decontextualisation of mindfulness from its Buddhist roots and practice – in particular its exclusion of the ethical commitments and trainings.

Hyland’s (2016a) following paper ‘The erosion of right livelihood: counter-educational aspects of the commodification of mindfulness practice’ elaborates upon the ‘McDonaldizing’ of mindfulness, and the need for more emphasis on the Buddhist ethical foundations; in this instance, particular attention is given to ‘Right Livelihood’ – the Fifth Noble Truth of the Buddha’s teaching, which traditionally precedes mindfulness (which is the Seventh).

He proceeds to outline four elements that represent the process through which mindfulness has become commodified – these include an emphasis on (or perhaps obsession with) enhancing efficiency, calculability, predictability and control through non-human technology.

It is significant to note that these first three elements are a frequent feature of many forms of Cognitive Therapies, of which Mindfulness-Based Approaches are considered a new ‘Third Wave’ (Wells and Fisher 2016). I have previously considered the extent to which forms of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) uses the language and semiotics of information

processing (Cohen 2010); particularly in the way processes of thoughts, feelings and courses of treatment are typically represented - in the form of flow charts and algorithms.

At first this more mechanistic way of reducing human experience to human functioning may appear at odds with more 'holistic' mindfulness-based approaches, and yet increasingly one may notice how the language of stress and stress-reduction, for which mindfulness is presented as the 'universal panacea' (Purser and Loy 2013), has become mechanised to the point where it is now quite common to hear reference being made to causes of stress being due to 'information overload', which may in turn result in 'burnout' (Adams 2016). Attending more closely to the language of stress may allow us to reformulate the problem of 'control through non-human technology' as instead being more an issue of 'overidentification' with non-human technology. In fact, this overidentification may well be being encouraged by advocates of neoliberalism to further entrench their ideological hegemony:

In neoliberal theory, the market is seen metaphorically as a machine for the coordination of the interests and actions of free individuals in a rational benevolent fashion. In the digital discourse, and with the introduction of network technology, this machine is no longer merely a metaphor; it is a reality, assumed to reaffirm and fortify neoliberal claims. (Fisher 2010, p.76)

One should also reflect on the increasing use of digital media to communicate and teach the principles and practice of mindfulness, and that in terms of locations of learning, we have moved from Buddhist temples, to clinical settings into increasingly online/virtual formats. Currently, one of the most popular ways people are being introduced to mindfulness is through the downloading of Apps such as 'Headspace', 'Smiling Mind' and 'Buddhify' etc. When one considers the more impersonal and privatised nature of these mediums, alongside the previously considered neoliberal objectives, then a scenario begins to emerge that may appear reminiscent of Adam Curtis' (2002) documentary 'Century of the Self' - where he considers the birth of consumer culture and the reimagining of humanity as "constantly moving happiness machines"⁹.

This reimagining may begin with forms of re-educating, and more extreme reactions to mindfulness have included David Forbe's (2015) *Salon* article, which bore the headline 'They want kids to be robots' and contained the subtitle "'Reformers" talk about mindfulness as if it's an answer, not just another way to sneak corporate culture in schools'. Reveley (2016) provides further commentary concerning the increasing popularity of school-based mindfulness training. His paper, titled 'Neoliberal meditations: How mindfulness training medicalises education and responsabilises young people', explores the concept of 'self-technology' and provides a critical account of teaching mindfulness in schools as a subtle method to instil neoliberal values into children under the seemingly benign headings and activities of therapy and well-being:

Learning to become mindful is one way members of the younger generation become charged with a moral responsibility to augment their own emotional well-being. The capacity for personal prevention and self-surveillance that school-

⁹ This is identified as a quote from President Herbert Hoover

based mindfulness training inculcates in the young in turn, is central to the self-managing figure that neoliberalism prizes. (Reveley 2016, p. 497)

In the current political and economic climate, it appears we have moved away from discourses of happiness to a more attainable and general objective of ‘Well-Being’ – and perhaps were President Hoover alive today, in this digital age, he may celebrate the emergence of neoliberal mindfulness as initiating the construction of “generally passive, serenity cyborgs.”

It is this passivity and tacitly amoral approach to neoliberal mindfulness that may be responsible for one of the more shocking abuses of the practice – its weaponisation. In Hyland’s (2016a) discussion of non-human technology, he also recognises the increasing use of mindfulness by the military, specifically the Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training (MMFT). Although his discussion is rather brief, it did remind me of Brian Daizen Victoria’s (2006) work ‘Zen at War’, which provided a sobering account of how Zen Buddhism was distorted into a nationalist, militarist ideology during the Second World War; an ideology that would effectively train Japanese soldiers to both live and kill in the present moment. The MMFT would appear to present similar risks as can be seen in Ronald Purser’s (2014) article (cited by Hyland 2016a) titled ‘The Militarisation of Mindfulness’, in which Purser quotes Dr Elizabeth Stanley, founder of the MMFT programme:

The military already incorporates mindfulness training, although it does not call it this – into perhaps the most fundamental soldier skill, firing a weapon. Soldiers learning how to fire the M-16 rifle are taught to pay attention to their breath and synchronise the breathing process to trigger the finger’s movement, “squeezing” off the round when exhaling. (Stanley quoted in Purser 2014)

This is, needless to say, totally at odds with Buddhist ethics, whose very first precept is:

Pānātipātā veramanī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi

I undertake the rule of training to refrain from killing any living things.
(Saddhātissa 1990, pp.5-6)

This last example, perhaps more so than the previous examples related to psychologisation and commodification, demonstrates the inherent danger of divorcing mindfulness from its traditional, spiritual and ethical framework.

Remembering Mindfulness

When considering the many transformations and translations of mindfulness it is important to refer back to its original meaning, which is discussed by Buddhist monk and translator Thanissaro Bhikkhu:

The British scholar¹⁰ who coined the term “mindfulness” to translate the Pali word *sati* was probably influenced by the Anglican prayer to be ever mindful of the needs of others—in other words, to always keep their needs in mind. But even

¹⁰ Thomas Williams Rhys Davids (1843-1922), founder of the Pali Text Society.

though the word “mindful” was probably drawn from a Christian context, the Buddha himself defined *sati* as the ability to remember, illustrating its function in meditation practice with the four *satipatthanas*, or establishments of mindfulness. (Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2008)

In regard to its etymological roots *sata* – remembering, it is also worthwhile **remembering** its origins in the Buddhist spiritual tradition, as this may well provide a means of resistance to neoliberal distortions of the practice, as will be discussed in the final part of this paper.

It is arguably the secularising and psychologising of Buddhism that has placed the practice in such an ambiguous position; one that leaves it wide open to commercial exploitation, assimilation and distortion. We can see examples of this ambiguity reflected both in the writings and role Jon Kabat-Zinn plays as one of the leading proponents of secular mindfulness.

Despite Kabat-Zinn’s significant training in traditional Buddhist schools¹¹ he appears openly and defiantly secular in his approach. In a recent interview in *The Psychologist*, titled ‘This is not McMindfulness’, he is quite clear in asserting, ‘First of all, I really try to stay as far away from the word *spiritual* as possible’ (Kabat-Zinn quoted in Shonin 2016, p.124). He continues to explain how the term may be misunderstood and polarising, at one point reflecting:

...if I call mindfulness a spiritual practice, then of course there will be people that think that’s wonderful and there will be an equal number of people, or ten times as many people that think well that’s kind of religion, voodoo, really it’s nonsense, and they won’t have anything to do with it. (Ibid. p.124)

In a previous panel interview organised by the *Nour Foundation* he was more explicit in his attitude towards the term ‘spirituality’:

I tend to stay away from the word spiritual as if it had some sort of toxic outpouring. (Kabat-Zinn 2013)

And yet, when defending his secular forms of mindfulness training from accusations of ‘McMindfulness’ he returns, or resorts to appeals reemphasising the spiritual roots, antiquity and authenticity of Buddhism:

This is not McMindfulness by any stretch of the imagination. What it is – now I have to use some Buddhist terminology – it is the movement of the Dharma [the Buddhist teachings] into the mainstream of society. Buddhism really is about the Dharma – it’s about the teachings of the Buddha. (Kabat-Zinn quoted in Shonin 2016, p.125)

On one level, there appears to be the recognition that it is the source of these teachings, the Buddha and by extension Buddhism, which gives this practice authenticity, legitimacy and lineage, and yet, simultaneously he prefers to place emphasis on the arguably lesser known Buddhist term ‘*Dharma*’; perhaps to ‘play down’ the spiritual elements by placing more emphasis on the teachings as opposed to the teacher. But it is difficult to conceive of any

¹¹ Primarily in the Zen traditions with Vietnamese Master Thich Nhat Hanh, and Korean Master Suengsahn.

traditional translation of *Dharma* that doesn't recognise its role as being primarily a spiritual teaching and training, primarily concerned with spiritual transformation and transcendence¹².

Yet there is another ambiguity of role that needs to be recognised on the part of the teacher of mindfulness – somewhere between mental health professional and *Lama/Guru*. This can be illustrated in Kabat-Zinn's address to the Google company in 2007. He was invited and introduced by Google's 'Jolly Good Fellow'¹³ enthusiast and devotee, Chade-Meng Tan. Tan (2016) would go on to author 'Joy on demand: the art of discovering happiness within' – a title which once again rather aptly illustrates the consumer-driven approach to both happiness and wellbeing. Tan reflects:

When I was young I read his first book¹⁴. This book deepened my interest and understanding of meditation, and from this meditation that I found inner peace and happiness, and I've been jolly ever since. (Kabat-Zinn and Tan 2007)

Following his introduction Tan greets Kabat-Zinn with a traditional *Namaste* gesture of placing both his palms together in the same manner in which one might honour an Indian *Guru* or Tibetan *Lama* (one's spiritual guide). It is not clear from the video (due to the angle of the camera) whether or not Kabat-Zinn returns the gesture, but it does raise interesting questions as to the role and status of teachers of mindfulness. Perry London had previously warned of the potential for the Psychologist/Psychotherapist to become akin to a 'secular priest' (London 2014, p.xii), and considering the spiritual, Buddhist roots of mindfulness there is every chance that this risk will increase exponentially, and that teachers of mindfulness assume the role, either consciously or unconsciously, of a *Guru/Lama* - but in this case of Kabat-Zinn, a spiritual teacher who consistently and intentionally excludes spirituality.

In Kabat-Zinn's address to Google¹⁵ one encounters more of the now familiar, mechanistic language of stress and mindfulness. At one point the purpose of mindfulness is described as '... tuning your instrument before you take it out on the road' (Kabat-Zinn and Tan 2007) and this is further reinforced by the stated disadvantages of not being mindful, which include '...impeding creativity, imagination, real thoughtfulness, real breakthrough type leadership sensibilities, because we're not firing on all cylinders.' (Ibid.)

There is also a degree of psychopathologisation evidenced in Kabat-Zinn's characterisation of modern society's lack of mindful awareness, but again highlighting the ambiguity of mindfulness, this psychiatric terminology is presented as a spiritual insight:

So from the point of view of the meditative traditions, the entire society is suffering from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder – certifiable diagnosis. (Ibid.)

¹² Specifically pertaining to the Four Noble Truths concerning the nature of suffering, the Noble Eightfold Path and the attainment of Awakening/Nirvana.

¹³ His former official job title at Google

¹⁴ Kabat-Zinn's 'Full Catastrophe Living' first published in 1991

¹⁵ Which to this date has over 3 million views on YouTube.

This is a curious statement, or discursive strategy, as it implicitly suggests that the Buddhist and Hindu traditions are (or were) ‘in the business’ of diagnosing and treating psychiatric conditions as opposed to being devoted to spiritual liberation – *Nirvana* or *Moksha*; thus the spiritual traditions are presented as willing and active partners in what critical psychologists would recognise and term as the ‘psy-complex’ (Fox and Prilleltensky 2001, p.287).

Mindful Nation UK

October 2015 marked the publication of an All-Party Parliamentary Report ‘Mindful Nation UK’. Jon Kabat-Zinn contributed to the discussions which led to the publication of the report and also wrote its foreword.

The practice of mindfulness is discussed primarily in relation to the training of one’s attention, again emphasising self-management:

It is typically cultivated by a range of simple meditation practices, which aim to bring a greater awareness of thinking, feeling and behaviour patterns, and to develop the capacity to manage these with greater skill and compassion. (Ibid. p.14)

The spiritual origins of Mindfulness are also discussed very briefly and dismissively:

Methods for training mindfulness have long been central to the contemplative traditions of Asia, especially Buddhism. Using these methods, but freeing them from any religious or dogmatic content, Jon Kabat-Zinn began teaching his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course (MBSR) to patients at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in the late 1970s. (Ibid. p.14)

It is important to note that there is no attempt to describe or explain what constitutes ‘religious or dogmatic’ content, or to justify why these features were deemed, or perceived as superfluous and in need of extraction. The reference to ‘skill and compassion’ has a particular meaning within a Buddhist context, both of which arguably pertain to one’s ethical conduct and broader spiritual training. The exclusion of the ‘religious’ makes these terms more ambiguous and open to misunderstanding or misapplication; as was previously discussed in relation to the emphasis placed on ‘acceptance’ when considered from and placed within a consumerist context.

The language of the report is decidedly secular in tone, and highlights economic incentives to further invest in mindfulness research and practice – ‘We particularly urge research into its potential to be cost effective, with savings in key areas of government expenditure.’ (Ibid. p.6)

When discussing mindfulness-based interventions in mental health contexts one may perceive a tension between the stated values of ‘compassion’ and a bottom line, economic analysis:

This burden of mental ill health is distressing not only to those directly affected but to all those who care for them. It is also immensely costly to the nation as it particularly affects people of working age: nearly half of all absenteeism and claims for incapacity benefits are due to mental illness. (Ibid. p.6)

The report proceeds to consider the promising emergence of mindfulness-based interventions before discussing the government's 'Foresight report' and introducing the decidedly neoliberal term 'mental capital':

The government's Foresight report¹⁶ developed the concept of mental capital, by which it meant the cognitive and emotional resources that ensured resilience in the face of stress, and the flexibility of mind and learning skills to adapt to a fast-changing employment market and longer working lives. It argued that developing the mental capital of the nation will be "crucial to our future prosperity and wellbeing". (Ibid.)

One may initially note that 'prosperity' is placed before 'wellbeing', but it is perhaps more significant to note that the 'Mindful Nation UK' report came out during a particularly volatile climate of protests throughout the UK in response to the government's continuing and expanding policies of austerity and widespread cuts to both local and public services¹⁷, a point that has also been noted by Hyland (2016b). Only four months prior to the publication of 'Mindful Nation UK' the *Guardian* newspaper was reporting 'Anti-austerity protests: tens of thousands rally across UK' (Gale 2015). Set against this backdrop it appears quite clear how the government may have been intending to utilise mindfulness-based interventions, to simultaneously cut costs whilst also better 'adapting' citizens to the prevailing, challenging economic conditions; rather than have their citizens organise and mobilise to challenge or change these economic conditions - which have largely, arguably been the consequences of an unchecked pursuit of neoliberal ideals (Monbiot 2017).

Despite the frequent references made to the emergence of mindfulness as signalling a 'revolution'¹⁸ (Pickert 2014), one might consider neoliberal expressions of mindfulness as being a form of political conservatism masquerading as something revolutionary; in this sense, it might be considered overtly 'anti-awakening' in both the Marxist political and Buddhist spiritual sense of the term.

An American Buddhist 'Wake-Up Call'

The word *Buddha* literally translates as 'one who is awake' (Kornfield 1996, p. xiii), and so in this sense a Buddhist is someone who is trying to wake up to reality. The nature of this awakening arguably began as a more individual and private affair¹⁹, but over time²⁰ and particularly recently, there have been movements to extend this awakening to include the socio-

¹⁶ There is a footnote provided at this point which reads – 'Foresight is a research unit under the direction of the Chief Scientific Advisor to HM Government. Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project: Making the most of ourselves in the 21st century. London: the Government Office for Science, 2008'

¹⁷ This followed the surprise re-election of David Cameron and the Conservative Party.

¹⁸ Pickert was the author of Time Magazine's 2014 leading article (and front page headline) 'The Mindful Revolution: Finding peace in a stressed-out, digitally dependent culture may just be a matter of thinking differently'

¹⁹ Initially related to one's personal experience and wish to rid oneself of *Dukkha* – suffering (both physical and existential/psychological)

²⁰ In the case of the emergence of the Bodhisattva ideal in Mahayana Buddhism – which will be explained subsequently.

economic and political spheres. This approach is exemplified by the numerous schools of engaged Buddhists that have emerged since the 1950s (Sivaraksa 2015, King 2009, Moon 2004).²¹

Bhikkhu Bodhi is not alone in recognising the need for Buddhists to become more politically-literate and aware. Historically Buddhism itself may be thought of as a revolutionary movement opposed to the rigid rituals, hierarchies and caste system of Brahmanism, including the exclusion of women from monastic life (Kalupahana 1992). This revolutionary potential was certainly recognised by figures like the Indian political activist and spiritual leader Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956). The Ambedkar movement clearly demonstrates how a spiritually-informed political movement ‘woke up’ the *Dalit*²² (so-called ‘untouchable’ caste) community to their subjugation, through his *Navayāna* (New Vehicle) - a more politically and socially Engaged Buddhism (Ambedkar 1992).

Ambedkar (1956) even composed an essay titled ‘Buddha or Karl Marx’, comparing their respective approaches to revolution and liberation. Ambedkar depicts the Buddha and his teachings as being essentially Socialist in character; pointing out the Buddha’s emphasis on equality and democracy within the *Sangha* (monastic community).

When considering the Marxist endorsement of violent means and a dictatorship of the proletariat, he reflects:

The Buddha’s method was different. His method was to change the mind of man: to alter his disposition: so that whatever man does, he does it voluntarily without the use of force or compulsion. (Ambedkar 1956. p. 22).

Indeed, this emphasis on the mind is one of the first aspects of Buddhist teaching and practice that many Westerners are introduced to, and is perhaps, in part, responsible for its subsequent psychologisation. One particularly popular verse is the first paragraph of the Buddhist scripture the *Dhammapada*²³, which reads:

We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. (quoted in Kornfield 1993, p.4)

At first this may sound reminiscent of the Hegelian idealism that Marx was seeking to challenge, in his recognition that our socio-economic conditions (the world of inequality and ‘class struggle’ which we find ourselves in) also shape our thoughts and lives. In this way, it appears that Ambedkar was searching for a Middle Way between the material and spiritual realities – ‘Humanity does not only want economic values, it also wants spiritual values to be retained.’ (Ambedkar 1956, p.22)

Despite the oft repeated quote from Marx reducing religion to being the ‘opiate of the masses’, it is worthwhile to consider the preceding part of this quote which acknowledges:

²¹ One of the best-known, oft-cited examples is the Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh’s active opposition to the Vietnam war (1955-1975) and his engaged international ‘Community of Interbeing’.

²² From the Sanskrit term ‘oppressed’.

²³ Particularly the popular translation by Thomas Byrom.

Religious suffering is the expression of real suffering and at the same time the protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed, the heart of the heartless world, as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. (Marx 1844)

Additionally, we may note that towards the end of this discussion, Marx's language of revolution explicitly employs the terms 'realisation', 'liberation' and 'transcendence' – each of which has its own particular resonance and meaning within Buddhist teachings.

Carrette and King (2005) recognised that it is primarily through the commodification of Buddhism that the *Dharma* loses much of its capacity to transform individuals and society, but they also note the emergence of 'engaged' forms of Buddhism which may lead to more authentically revolutionary positions. From this perspective, the repression of the spiritual - the desacralising, psychologising and secularising of Buddhism can be understood to have intentionally diluted and blanded mindfulness into a more passive and compliant practice. Yet they also recognise that the spiritual roots of these traditions may still serve to undermine and effectively challenge or even subvert the neoliberal agenda:

In a context where 'the Market' has become the new God of our times (Cox, 1999), the emergence of socially orientated forms of 'spirituality', critically engaging with the wisdom of the world's 'religious' traditions, may yet have a key role to play in providing the means for resisting unrestrained consumerism and the commodification of life itself. (Carrette and King 2005, pp. 176-177)

We may well be starting to witness a return or (from a Buddhist perspective) rebirth of the repressed, the shaking of long-forgotten foundations, as Engaged Buddhists begin to communicate in more politically-spiritually charged ways that disrupt the now familiar, normalised, neoliberal approaches to mindfulness. One example of this is a recent article by a former Buddhist chaplain, writer and popular commentator on contemporary issues in Buddhism, Daniel Fisher, in his article 'A People's Buddhism' - where he seeks to positively re-evaluate the contribution of Ambedkar to modern engaged Buddhism and subsequently laments (in overtly Marxist terms):

An inordinate amount of time, space, and resources, then, gets dedicated to things like mindfulness meditation (now a multi-billion-dollar industry), and that focus tends to tilt in a direction that is "individualistic," "ethically-neutral," and "consumer-oriented." Predictably, "bourgeois Buddhists" don't show much solidarity with either the proletariat or dharmic liberation theologies. (Fisher 2017)

More recently, following the shock election of Donald Trump in the United States, signalling the rise of populist and far-right elements, the leading teachers of the American Buddhist community also appear to be becoming more politically engaged and active. On April 9th, 2017, the Buddhist publication *Lion's Roar* online magazine published an open statement titled 'Stand Against Suffering: An Unprecedented Call to Action by Buddhist Teachers'.

The statement begins by firmly rooting itself within the Buddhist scriptures and tradition:

As long as a society protects the vulnerable among them, they can be expected to prosper and not decline – The Buddha, in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutta* (Bodhi et al. 2017)

This initial scriptural instruction serves to provide spiritual, textual support for a renewed emphasis on social justice. Buddhist imagery and iconography is also called into service, particularly the image of the *Bodhisattva Kwan Yin*, whose chief attribute is active compassion. The *Bodhisattva* ideal and image is particularly suited to this more engaged approach to Buddhism. The *Bodhisattva* ideal itself represents a revolutionary phase in the development of *Mahayana*²⁴ Buddhism where the goal of attaining a transcendent *Nirvana* came to be viewed as less preferable and important than delaying final awakening in order to be of continued benefit and guidance to all sentient beings (Gombrich et al. 1998).

The image of the Bodhisattva (see figure i) is also significant as they are typically depicted in a traditional meditative pose, but now with one leg extending out from the familiar lotus position, reaching into the world – a valuable visual metaphor for finding a balance between the spiritual and material world. The statement continues to use the *Bodhisattva* ideal as appeal for praxis:

Committed to compassion, we follow the example of the bodhisattva Kwan Yin, “she who hears the cries of the world.” Like her, we listen to the cries of suffering people and do everything in our power to help and protect them. In this time of crisis, we hear the cries of millions who will suffer from regressive policies of the new U.S. administration targeting our most vulnerable communities. We hear the cries of a nation whose democracy and social fabric are at risk. We join in solidarity with many others who are also hearing these cries, knowing that together we can be a remarkable force for transformation and liberation. (Bodhi et al. 2017)

²⁴ The ‘Great Vehicle’ of Buddhism – which is typified by the centrality of the figure of the Bodhisattva.



Figure 1 - Kwan Yin

The statement appeals for readers to become ‘engaged bodhisattvas’ (ibid.) and reminds the reader of the central Buddhist teachings of interdependence – a principle at the core of engaged Buddhism. The Buddhist teachings on interdependence are intended to challenge the illusory sense of alienation and separation we have from one another (in the personal/social sense) and our world (in the ecological and environmental sense), and serves to illustrate the profound inter-relatedness of all beings and phenomena.

Interdependence is also intimately related to the qualities of *Bodhicitta* – the will to, and altruistic aspiration towards awakening, that is further exemplified by the figure of the *Bodhisattva*. In Shantideva’s seminal text (700 CE) ‘The Way of the *Bodhisattva*’²⁵ he provides a striking illustration to demonstrate the level of empathy one is seeking to cultivate to in response to the suffering of others. He considers the way our hands naturally reach down to hold our foot if we have injured it and asks the question - ‘The pain felt in my foot is not my hand’s, so why, in fact, should one protect the other?’ (Shantideva 2007, p.123); likewise, the Buddhist practitioner is encouraged to cultivate *Bodhicitta* until she responds to another’s suffering as if it is her own – because according to the teachings of interdependence it is, ultimately, our own.

The statement concludes by again referring to another popular iconographic depiction of *Kwan Yin*, that depicts her with one thousand hands reaching out to suffering beings – this now serves as an illustration for the numerous varieties of action through which one might seek to serve

²⁵ The *Bodhisattvacharyāvatāra*

others, and work towards a more just and compassionate society (Bodhi et al. 2017). The statement concludes:

More than ever, we have to be compassionate, brave, and engaged bodhisattvas. Like Kwan Yin, we hear the cries of a suffering world and, with wisdom and love, we respond. (Ibid. 2017)

Concluding Narrative Reflection and Call to Arms

Following my reading of the *Lion's Roar* statement I was reminded of a story I was recently told about a Buddhist monk who visited an exhibit of Tibetan Buddhist art at the National Palace Museum in Taiwan, accompanied by his elderly teacher. His primary reason for visiting was to pay his respects to a famous, thousand-armed image of *Chenrezig*²⁶. Meditating in front of the huge image, the young monk began to count the number of hands, and to his surprise and disappointment noted that there were only nine hundred and eighty eight hands, and not the prescribed one thousand. Seeing his student appearing perturbed the teacher inquired “what is the matter?”, to which the student replied, “the Bodhisattva is incomplete - it only has nine hundred and eighty-eight arms!”. The master looked at the image for some time, and then looked back at his student and asked, “how many arms do you have?”. The student paused, thinking this might be a trick question, but eventually replied “I have two arms”. Pointing to his student’s arms the teacher began to count “nine hundred and ninety-nine, one thousand.”

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²⁶ The Tibetan name for *Kwan Yin*

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